

Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent. 3 December, 2017. Slow Grace.

“Hello. You have called the Indescribable Utility Company. Your call is very important to us. Please hold the line.”

And then we wait. And wait. And wait.

What are you waiting for? Farmers often have to wait for rain, then the right amount of rain, then the right time to plant. And then there is the waiting for the seed to grow to crops and waiting for the right time to harvest.

A lot of the Biblical images, including images around waiting, are very agricultural. Seeds being planted then waiting for growth. Plants and trees bearing fruit and seeds at particular times or according to particular patterns. Waiting always has a mixture of hope and expectation. There is the expectation of what might happen, what should happen, and the hope that the best of what is expected is what will happen.

Just checking. “Your call is very important to us. Please hold the line.” Still waiting.

We wait for rain and growth. We wait for the right time. We wait for some things to finish and for other things to begin. We wait for events which we anticipate with joy or with dread. Waiting. A lot of life is waiting. The Samuel Becket play ‘Waiting for Godot’ has some of the most disturbing images I have even heard of people spending their whole lives waiting without really engaging. At the very end the two main characters say “Well, shall we go?” “Yes. Let’s go.” But they wait and don’t move.

Waiting can seem pointless. But it can also be fruitful. Waiting can be mesmerising and frustrating. But it can be important. We may be waiting for light, for enlightenment, for answers. We may be waiting to know why. Why, to some big question. Or what. What does all of this, or even just some important part which touches us, what does it mean? We wait.

Sometimes we wait impatiently. There is a quote, variously attributed, which goes “God give me patience. And give it to me now!”

Sometimes we do actually need to wait. Creatively. Wait.

The world is actually a bit fast a lot of the time. And we often want to speed it up even more. That email that I was sent yesterday. Someone is already thinking that they had the wrong address and should send it again in case I didn’t get it because I have not yet replied. That text message that I got this morning. I haven’t replied yet. I might get a reminder before too long.

Those things we are waiting for that we want to happen? Can we hurry them up so they get here? Those things we don’t want to happen but which are going to happen anyway, can we hurry them up so that they are out of the way? The answers? Can they get here faster? Yet pushing life to hurry up can mean we lose life along the way.

Waiting can be good. Taking things a bit slower. In response to the overwhelming tsunami of packaged, wrapped, commodity size fast food around us, there is a movement called ‘slow food’. Some things, like nutritious food, are worth waiting for. I have a slow cooker, which I haven’t used yet!

I haven’t had the time yet to slow down and include a slower approach into my food preparation. Wait a few weeks (or maybe a few months) and somebody please ask me if I have used my slow cooker yet. Yet slow food is not just about the preparation time. It is also about the time taken to enjoy and share the food. Whether alone or, preferably, with someone else, meals are not just about consumption.

Taking time for slow sharing and sitting with what is unfolding, even time for a bit of anticipation, is a good thing. At the next meal, don't just rush in. Wait.

Alongside slow food can I suggest there is something valuable in slow grace. Grace is a word and a concept we use to describe the gifts of God poured into our lives. Like strength. And answers. And love. And the gifts of connection and relationship when we 'get' what God is on about. And the gift of Jesus. And a lot more. Yet, I suggest, grace cannot be rushed. The blessing of that deep connection with God is not something that comes when we push a button on a 'God's grace dispenser' and it is there. Or at least, like the best gifts which enrich our lives, there is always more unpacking to do and more to grow into than we might first see.

Like in baptism. The blessing for Charlie, as he is baptised today, is immediate. AND there is plenty to wait for as the effect of what we celebrate today unfolds in his life.

Expecting, even hoping for, slow grace is about giving space, giving God space to act in God's time. Waiting. Watching. There are things we miss when we rush. There are things around us we do not see when we rush through life. There is the exquisite fine detail of the message and encounter and experience of God which may be missed if we are rushing towards a particular idea of how this relationship is supposed to unfold.

In a lot of the readings we have at this time of the year there are, sometimes somewhat scary, references to what is called the 'second coming'. The expectation that Jesus is returning and something huge is then going to happen. Those expectations and the stories that are included in our readings are part of the early church trying to rush God. They were getting a bit sick of waiting. But they had to learn to wait. They had to learn to sit with what is, rather than put all the focus and energy into something out there elusively in the future.

Waiting is not about being passive. It is about being present. It is not about being stuck but it is about being alive and awake and aware.

Expecting slow grace is about expecting that God will act in ways we can't predict or plan for. Today, on this first Sunday in the church year, the first Sunday in Advent, we are reminded about waiting and we are reminded to do that with hope. Let our hope be that God will speak to us in ways and through people who we might not expect. Let our hope be for something more satisfying than quick fixes, quick answers, quick revelation of directions in life, but hope that we will be taken to places that we can't see at the moment.

If you are aware of waiting, let this be a reminder to enjoy that time. Sit with the questions and the anticipation. Don't rush from here to the destination. The richest blessings may well be the things you discover along the way.

Amen

Paul Mitchell